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Seven major kinds of "bad" or "dishonest" marking systems much used by English teachers ar" briefly described. English teachers are urged to be more aware of recent publications which evaluate various marking systems. (BN)

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Seven Classic Ways of Grading Dishonestly

Orville Palmer

After identifying seven sins in grading practices, the author invites English teachers "to take a long look at the explosive evaluation situation in our American schools." Mr. Palmer is editor for College Board programs of the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey.

HAVING met hundreds of them over the past decade, and having once been one myself, I am a staunch admirer of English teachers. Having stated this, it may seem strange that I wish to discuss some classic ways in which English teachers conduct themselves dishonestly. I would add at once that, for most English teachers, it is an unwitting dishonesty—for which it is to be hoped there exists a large loophole in the laws of legal and moral culpability.

Some of these kinds of dishonesty doubtless are tied to personality traits, others derive from teaching or training background, and some must stem from other sources. A study of English teachers and their grading systems, I suspect, would constitute a fascinating psychological investigation. As a contribution toward such a study, I would like to offer, tentatively and with a disclaimer of any desire to insult an honorable profession, a description of seven dishonest marking systems much used by English teachers.

Of course, no two marking systems of English teachers are ever quite alike, even as no two English teachers are identical. Nevertheless, the major kinds of bad evaluation systems, or quasi-systems, may be identified.

1. *A first, and wholly indefensible, way of grading dishonestly is by abdication.* Because of inexperience, inadequate training, or overwork, the teacher in effect abdicates his responsibility for grading fairly and creatively. Such a teacher may claim that an adequate testing program would take more time than he can spare, or that test-making is an art for which he has no talent. At the last moment such a teacher will put together a crude, inadequate test, or use anything he can lay his hands on: a workbook unit test, a dog-eared commercial test; or he may assign an essay topic thought up on the spur of the moment. Rather than tailor his tests to his course, he may tailor his course to any available set of tests. But such a teacher clearly knows very little about student evaluation, shirks real responsibility in the matter, and, unfortunately, all too often he does nothing to improve his competence.

2. *The second method of grading dishonestly is by means of what can be called "the carrots and clubs" system.* In this system, grades may be raised by performing designated added tasks, or lowered by failure to avoid certain *bête noires* of the teacher. Here we find the teacher who fails every theme that contains a run-on sentence or, say, two spelling errors. And here we meet up with bonuses for good behavior and added effort.

In grade school, I suppose, a teacher may properly grade, in part at least, on "attitude and effort." But in high school and college, surely, the academic grade should be based on academic performance and little else. It is a mistaken and dangerous kindness—or mode of disciplinary action—to do otherwise. I dare

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say I shall affront more teachers on this point than any other. I can only urge that the line between rewarded good attitude and effort and favoritism is a treacherous one. I can only say that the more blatantly a teacher "buys" good behavior or extra effort, the greater the damage to class morale, to student ethics, and to academic standards. Beyond any question, the more extraneous factors enter into the marking system, the less meaning an academic grade possesses. Any grade becomes debased coinage to the same degree that it represents nonacademic effort and attainment. By extraneous factors I mean such things as classroom deportment, neatness of penmanship, imaginative covers for reports and similar artwork, extra credit for extra reading, and the like. Not that any one of these things is bad or even suspect in itself. My point is simply this: everything of an academic nature that the teacher grades—quizzes, themes, oral and written reports, required or volunteer work—should be graded on its merits and nothing else.

Here, of course, we face a problem of degree, of shades of gray. Probably there does not exist an English teacher who has wholly freed himself of "halo effect," of all those tangibles and intangibles of personal approval or disapproval of students' attitudes and conduct. Teaching is not, and should not be, an impersonal, cold-blooded enterprise. To the extent that it is not, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to make evaluation wholly impersonal. Yet I have observed that one excellent measure of a teacher's honesty and rectitude is the respect that students give to grades bestowed by the teacher known for his fairness and scrupulousness in marking.

3. *A third way to grade dishonestly is by default.* Here we find the teacher who looks at testing the way Lady Macbeth looked at her stain. He gives as little "house room" to tests as possible. In graduate school we find the professor who reluctantly gives a single term-end test. In secondary schools, the teacher who hates tests and claims they are meaningless or farcical, or an infernal nuisance, will give as few of them as possible. Sometimes his students are in a state of near-panic because the base for grades is so narrow a single misstep could spell disaster. Curiously enough, the teacher who hates tests very often also hates reading student themes, and his students consequently write few themes or none. (Such an arrangement is probably the best single guarantee that students will not learn how to write competently.)

The dishonesty lies precisely in the unfair base. Any test, of whatever nature, is but a limited and inadequate sampling of the student's knowledge and achievement. Every test will have its defects of validity and reliability.

A student instinctively knows that the odds improve when he takes four tests rather than a single test. He knows that the chances are better that he will be able to demonstrate his skills and understanding—because the base is broader.

4. *The testing zealots, a quite different manner of men, furnish us a fourth system of grading unwisely and dishonestly.* The zealot sets his students to racing with a vengeance—daily quizzes, almost daily written assignments, weekly tests, quarter-term, mid-term, final examinations, reports of all sorts. He grades everything short of classroom posture. At its extreme, in such systems everything becomes an ordeal, the course an endurance contest or a problem in survival.

The zealot's quizzes check whether the students have read their assigned pages of text, whether assigned short stories or novels were read carefully. They are, in short, a policing device. Even notebooks may be called in and graded.

A certain amount of such police work may be necessary, of course; it should, however, stop well short of constant surveillance and the spirit of the police officer administering a lie detector test.

Until the sheer weight of oversize classes or the scythe of Father Time cuts down these teachers, they average up their dozens of minor and major grades, using elaborate formulas of computation and weighting, secure in the belief they have evolved a scientific, fair system of evaluation. Possibly they have, but I would suggest they have paid too high a price for it. The wine that issues from their wine press almost always tastes of crushed seeds and has lost its bouquet in the process. The good will, the student rapport, the main purposes of English course work have been lost somewhere in the process.

5. *Changing the rules in mid-game is a fifth way to grade dishonestly, and it is always a temptation to a harried or uncertain teacher.* It amounts to shifting the grading standards, either up or down, for workbook tests, themes, examinations, and so on. The teacher may start off the course by distributing quantities of low or failing grades, to frighten the children into greater effort, then ease his standards later. Or he may tighten his grading at mid-term, to put spurs into the lazy and laggard, to discipline an unruly class, or merely to rectify a grading curve that threatens to be top-heavy with A's and B's and unballasted with failures.

Here, too, we discover the irate teacher who decides to "get tough" about bad spelling or bad grammar. Henceforward it will be an automatic F for every theme with two or more misspelled words, an F for any essay examination with a run-on sentence, and so on.

Strewing with booby traps the field across which the student must march, making a hazard-cluttered obstacle course of every theme, may or may not eliminate misspelled words and rambling sentences. It can usually be counted on to put frost on the fragile flower of student creativity and enthusiasm, to put greater tension between teacher and student, even to make learning an ordeal or out of the question.

6. *A sixth kind of dishonesty is displayed by the psychic grader.* His is an ingenuous method—it can scarcely be called a system since it is neither structured nor organic. Undoubtedly it is an ultimate variety, or extension, of halo effect grading. (Halo effect probably constitutes the chief weakness of teacher-made tests and evaluation.)

The psychic teacher may inform you that he, for one, has no need for anything so coarse-meshed as a test to catch his fish in. You are given to understand that he can tell almost immediately, in his bones or by means inscrutable to ordinary man, who the A students will be, who the B. And he will swear by the distinction between the two. To this teacher tests are superfluous or at best mere window dressing.

7. *A final classic method of grading dishonestly—and one we all have encountered at least once between grade school and graduate school—anchors the grading system in the rainbow of an impossible perfection.* Teachers adhering to this system inform their students, in effect, that an A is out of the question, and that only the most brilliant and industrious can hope for the accolade of a B. Often this teacher can be counted on to fail twice as many students as anyone else in his department. He prides himself on his high standards. And he grumbles at his soft-hearted colleagues' habit of debasing departmental standards by the indiscriminate bestowal of high grades and by a rabbit-hearted reluctance to fail the dullards.

When you challenge their use of one or more of the above systems or ways

of grading, some English teachers stubbornly and even angrily reply that it is perfectly fair to use any set of rules you like, so long as you have all your students running the same race and abiding by the same set of rules. This of course has a sporting air to it and seems to doff its cap to egalitarian democracy and our American way of life.

The fact remains that such a reply is specious. The students in any high school English class are not running one race but several. They are also racing all the other academic classes in their school, and (if college bound) they are racing all the other students in all the other high schools in the land.

If every English teacher makes his own set of rules, and answers to no one's conscience but his own, there can only be anarchy in these races. This, in a very real sense, is the state of affairs today.

Of course, nothing can be more corrosive of values and goals than the concept of academic courses as "races" in which the winners snatch the A's, the runners-up win the B's, and the also-rans receive only C's and worse. When the grade becomes more important than the learning itself, education itself is subverted.

Are all grading systems, then, dishonest? Are all English teachers culpable? Somewhere have English teachers courageously faced and conquered the complex problems of grading and marking? Are there articles in print that should be read? These are fair questions. I submit that every English teacher should answer them for himself, or at least start searching for the answers.

I recall a philosophy professor who impressed me greatly by the vehemence of his views on the folly of losing sight of an achieved distinction. By the same token, it is folly, or scandalous, that teachers remain in ignorance of progressive methods of marking, of achieved new standards of evaluation.

Therefore, I invite every English teacher to take a long look at the explosive evaluation situation in our American schools. I suggest that he look into and utilize, say, the recent volumes of the *Education Index*, to learn what is being thought and said about "Marking Systems." The English teacher who does so will quickly discover that a great deal is being said and written by grade school and high school teachers, by college professors, and by school administrators. I hope he will not fail to note how very little is being said and written by English teachers.

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